

Reality Days

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America's Got Talent will begin its third season this summer on NBC network however, the concept of broadcasting talent shows has been popular in the United States and the United Kingdom dating back to the 1930s or 1940s, otherwise known as Radio Days.

Contestant #1: Nellie Valentine

Recently, I had the opportunity to sit in the audience during a taping of the upcoming reality T.V. series, *America's Got Talent*. The tickets were free, and I had a long lunch, so I joined about a thousand other citizens of the Puget Sound area and crowded into the Pantages Theatre located in Tacoma, Washington. People from all over the Northwest had come to nervously showcase their talent, or, as the case sometimes was, painfully display their lack of it. Nevertheless, I was mesmerized. I don't know if it is because I spent some of the happiest times during my childhood in Los Angeles and some sort of "celebrity bug" pumps through those aqueducts, but I have always been a sucker for the glitz and glamour that Hollywood projects. This is of course, only the *image* of Hollywood, and it is as false as any starlet's silhouette. The *real* Hollywood is dirty and a bit disappointing, sort of like a bad first kiss.

However, despite the cracked veneers, I can still be dazzled on occasion when a little bit of the glitz, a tiny smudge of the glamour that exists in my imagination, rolls into my burg in the middle of an ordinary week. Besides, by all accounts, this leg of the tour was serious. The woman who sat to the right of me during the first half of taping told me, before she even sat down, that her daughter was one of the contestants. This meant I could ply her with questions between acts about her "insider knowledge" of reality T.V. She was more than happy to share her daughter's journey with me, and I couldn't help but feel a little envious. Out of the thousands of wanna-be celebrities from the entire region of Washington, Oregon, and Idaho, who had auditioned the previous Saturday, only a dozen or so were chosen to return for the taping. Out of those few, only a couple would make it to Las Vegas, where they would

be up against competitors from other regions of the United States and earn a chance for the grand prize: a million dollars. As I sat there and listened to some of her insights about the audition process, I realized a few things about my own ambitions.

There exists somewhere in the rubble of my childhood keepsakes, a Betamax videotape of me, aged six years old, wearing ice skates and a Hershey Kiss costume, my hair tied in a ponytail just over my left ear while I maneuvered the ice deftly one moment, then desperately the next. Now, I can see myself only in the tape of my mind, the reel of memory watching me follow the line of other candy-dressed skaters one moment, then flashing a look of surprise the next as I flailed my arms out to keep my balance.

I remember trying to scan the dark Milky Way of space outside the roving spotlights for my parents. I also remember some of the instructions that came from a woman dressed like a Raggedy Ann doll. She seemed enormous to me then, her painted face ominous even though she was smiling, perhaps because her exaggerated, garish red lips were barking orders like, "Keep up with the spotlight! Stay in line! Smile!" But this much of what she said is still clear, "If you fall, whatever you do, STAY DOWN and ROLL OUT OF THE WAY! Those little blades on your feet are as sharp as razors."

Despite the horrific image this comment arouses in me now, I am now only vaguely aware that when I witnessed another girl in a Hershey Kiss costume bite the dust, I wasn't fazed. However, I do recall that I was slightly undone by the cold tinge of envy I felt because I could not be a "Sleepy Time Baby" or an "Ice Princess," two roles with better costumes. From what I remember, I never smiled in the video, not once. I was far too conscious of the absurdity of this ritual, or perhaps my appearance, for such pleasantries. I knew I was a silver lamé trapezoid with a sash that resembled toilet paper, and the outfit seemed to denote the lowly place I held within the hierarchy of the spectacle.

Lights are flashing, neon bulbs glow red, white, and blue as the M.C. Nick Cannon yells into the mic, "Are you guys ready for Aaaaamerica's Goooot Taaaalent?" Cheers from the crowd. Here I am now, in my early thirties, excited to witness the taping of another spectacle. This time, I am not a performer and am only required to passively view from afar. Before I could put my finger on my exact feelings about this, the taping of the show had be-

gun.

The first contestant was Nellie Valentine, a pot-bellied pig owned by an aging couple from Puyallup. The husband and wife who raised Nellie from infancy were dressed like a clownish version of the farmer and his wife from *American Gothic*, as both sported overalls, red bandanas, and some of the goofiest grins outside of a Heehaw revival. While they instructed the audience to watch Nellie perform her tricks, the pig followed her cues and a handful of treats, as she jumped through a hoop, played a horn, and climbed inside a suitcase. The act was cute but I worried about Nellie's pale pink skin exposed in a Vegas desert, as her only protection would be just a sprinkling of soft white hair.

Fortunately, I didn't have to ponder a pig in sunscreen too long. The three judges convened and passed down their verdicts to the following contestants. Sharon Osbourne delicately put the kibosh on the porcine act, Piers Morgan shut down county fair cowpoke Leapin' Louie Lickenschtein (I'm guessing at the spelling here, it was pronounced *Lick-n-ssh-teen*), and David Hasslehoff dished out a goodbye to dance troop Monkee Madness.

I've found one of the coolest things about seeing celebrities in person versus on the screen is the myth busting perspective you get from this experience. Each encounter I've had has managed to dispel some belief I previously held about the person or at least revealed a little idiosyncrasy about the person behind the polished celebrity persona. With men, height is the most noticeable discrepancy (though the Hoff appears tall and is tall, at I'd guess about 6'2"), but with women, I find that weight is the big illusion. I am always shocked when I see women, in this case Sharon Osbourne, who I thought would be bigger are actually normal and even what I would call thin.

Confronted with my own surprise in situations like these, I can't help but wonder from where this stems. I know that even seemingly solid concepts such as height and weight are actually relative and completely dependant on the standards set by which society you consider, but I can't help but recognize that my shock at Sharon's weight and the Hoff's height has more to do with our society's expectations of appearance, rather than my own.

After the first round of lackluster contestants the judges dismissed, I became anxious to get to either some extraordinary talent or some hideously bad attempts. This is what I considered the meat of the competition, and I

was getting hungry. I wanted to hear some singing and see some dancing, but most of all, after waiting for almost an hour to get in to this gig, I realized I wanted more than anything to clap and whistle like a wild woman or boo and holler like a banshee. The crowd, I noticed, once enthusiastic and smiling, anxious to be videotaped during Nick Cannon's warm-up, now mumbled and grimaced between acts. It became clear what the collective sentiment was. We villagers had left our jobs and responsibilities to gather in the town square for some entertainment, and we wanted it now, dammit, whether it be spectacle or spectacular. Turned out, we soon got both.

Contestant # 4: Cara

A woman approached the mic. She was about 5'8" and slightly overweight, dressed in blue jeans and a red shirt. One pant leg was caught on the lip of her construction boot, and her dull brown hair hung loosely over stooped shoulders. I felt myself, along with the crowd, turning on her before she even uttered a word. How dare she mock the seriousness of this occasion! Didn't she realize this was a competition for a million dollars? The least she could have done was try to look presentable. I scanned the face next, waiting for some sort of explanation about her blatant mockery of our precious time. Then I saw it. The facial features of the woman were not lined up according to my optic nerves. My eyes perceived incongruities first with the right side of the forehead, then the nose, and finally the mouth. The crowd recoiled from her and turned silent as Sharon spoke softly to the contestant.

"Hello, dear...Carrie, is it?"

"My name is Cara."

"All right, Cara, tell us where are you from and what is it that you do?"

"I'm from Seattle, and I work in a gay nightclub, as a bartender and sometime singer. I like cabaret and show tunes mostly. Whatever the boys want, I give 'em." She threw her arms out as if she were anticipating an embrace, but then quickly dropped them down at her sides where they continued to hang lifelessly.

Audience members shifted uncomfortably in their seats. There were a few coughs and a couple of throat clearings heard, but, mostly, no one made a

sound.

“Okay Cara, why do you think you have not become a professional singer yet?”

“Well, I think because of my deformity. I haven’t been given the chance.”

“Now, Cara, how can you be sure it wasn’t your singing?” Sharon cooed.

“Well, like, I auditioned for this cruise ship once, and, before I even opened my mouth, they told me I wasn’t what they were looking for.”

Gasps and sympathetic clucking now erupted from the same crowd who had just retracted from the contestant a half a minute before.

“Okay Cara, now what would you like to sing for us?” Sharon continued.

“I’d like to sing ‘Somewhere (There’s A Place For Us)’ by Barbra Streisand.”

Now, I felt like a heel for being so superficial and quick to judge, but, upholding what I considered my moral code, I decided objectivity was necessary in determining talent, and I could not allow sympathy to sway my vote. This was after all, a serious competition for one million dollars, and when it comes to singing, I cannot allow a hard luck story to corrupt the integrity of my decision. Too many people think they can sing when they cannot, and while I won’t necessarily string them up for committing noise pollution, I won’t hand them a million bucks either. It just wouldn’t be fair.

Cynicism trumped sympathy with the audience as well. We whispered and glanced at our neighbors simultaneously, the self-righteousness caging our now, defensive comments. I leaned over to the gal next to me and mimicked Mike Meyers’s Coffee Talk character from SNL. “Oh, she’s gonna do “mooyo Baaarbruuuh...she betta be goood” But then just as quickly as I and everyone else had mocked her, I became aware of these words from deep inside my mind. *Please, God, let her sing like Barbra. Let her have the voice and presence of an angel. Make a sound that soars above circumstance and drowns out mediocrity. Lift us to our feet and bring us back down to our knees. Allow this woman to show every last one of us up. I need you now to show us all.* The auditorium fell silent and we waited for remorse or vindication.

“Soomeedaaay....Soomeenweeere...

We'll find a new way of living...we'll find a way of forgiving...

Sooooooooommeeenbeeeerrree...

Theere's a place fooor us..."

The sound that tumbled out of the mangled face was clear, strong, and pitch perfect. She hit every note with clarity of execution and depth of feeling. My chest rose and fell with each note and I leapt to my feet with the rest of the audience, shocked, relieved, and newly resurrected. The performance was flawless and a unanimous vote for Vegas was handed down as the crowd continued to holler and clap wildly. This is why we were here, I thought, to be redeemed and to feel reconstituted, our spirits saved under the flashing neon lights of a false, but brilliant psuedo-reality.

Contestant #9: Ginger

Unfortunately, our gleeful transcendence into redemption was short lived. I discovered, along with some of my neighbors in the audience, that while I love a success story, especially an underdog success story, I also enjoy when another person fails. I don't mean in the pathetic and embarrassing way that someone who doesn't get the joke fails, but more like the comedian who bombs and heckles back at the audience sort of way. The professional and unflappable failure who, in his or her undaunted way, allows me to feel superior in my cozy seat. On some level, I am waiting for this feeling to overcome me, so that I may generously dole out my pity, condolences, and even some admiration as I bask in the surprisingly warm glow of a false ego.

Ginger from Portland provided this outlet. Upon first glance, she reminded me of Judy Garland from *The Wizard of Oz*, but maybe it was because she seemed a little too uncomfortably crammed into her polka dots, and just as unsure of herself as the talented icon (although in Ms. Garland's case, her insecurities were tragically ungarnered).

Unfortunately for Ginger, her looks were all she had in common with Judy Garland and it took the crowd all of five seconds to declare this. I however, was in an unusual position. This was my seat-neighbor's daughter, so I was fully prepared to give her every chance in the world despite my trepidation. But something seemed off right from the get go. I couldn't decide if it

was the pig-tails, the spinning wheel, or perhaps the basket of wool at her feet but I knew this was gonna be baaad. Her mother leaned over to me.

"I told you she had a schtick."

"Well, I am more than game for some comedy," I replied.

And I meant it. If you can entertain then you're all right with me. We had just witnessed a thirteen-year-old comedian who was more charming than funny and a guy who belted out an Adam Sandler-esque (when he was still funny) love song to David Hasslehoff. This is exactly the kind of hodgepodge hootenanny I crave in a talent competition. The shticks, the stupidity, and the spectacle, all of it rolled up amongst the real unpolished jewels of a talent waiting to be "discovered" are the hallmarks of the medium and the American Dream, a declaration that one person can rise above circumstance to claim their inalienable rights of Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness.

The buzzer sounded almost immediately. Ginger was booed and assaulted by the crowd with a viciousness that seemed a bit overwrought. People were jumping up and down, screaming and pounding the floor with their feet. From the light emanating off her figure, you felt she was naked somehow, bare and exposed up there, one woman standing alone on a wooden stage, being vilified. It wasn't entertaining, it wasn't interesting, but it was as real as anything I have ever seen. She was just suspended up there, on the chopping block, and we all were calling for her blood.

I glanced fearfully, over to her mother. To my surprise her face was beaming with a radiance I have only seen on new mothers holding newborns. It was as though the light from her daughter's body was radiating across the auditorium and over the rows of people chanting, "NO! NO! NO!" the mother whispered to no one in particular.

"She knew she was being set up. She told me she was being set up. She said, 'Mom, I know I'm being set up. But how cool is it to be chosen... from the thousands of people who showed up that day, they saw something in me.'"

I offered the mother my condolences, "I have to hand it to her. She's got moxie. How many people can stand up there and sing? Not me, that's for sure."

However, at this point Ginger's mother wasn't listening to me. She was watching her daughter with a kind of awe that struck me. Witnessing her slaughter anew, her sacrifice up there on stage, something began to change

in me. I saw Ginger as she projected herself. She became, at that moment, a saint of sorts. I saw that she was unsilenced by the crowd, continuing to sing her song, and spinning her yarn, while the mob went wild shouting for her to get off the stage. But she stood her ground, lit by the spotlight, a lone martyr following her own mission. The crowd, just like I had, then began to turn. She was a bad singer for sure, no doubt about that, but she was unafraid, undaunted, and unbroken. We had to respect that.

I told myself the overzealous reaction from the crowd was just a need for an intermission, and my feelings about that moment just my imagination. It was right after her performance that I was asked if I wanted to be a seat filler and therefore move around the crowd, filling empty seats, and upgrading my view. I accepted and abandoned Ginger's mother, being whisked away to fill a spot closer to the stage. Just as I sat down, something I had almost let slip by my consciousness, crept in amongst the everyday thoughts.

In my mind's eye, a little girl in a silver lamè costume, gliding across the ice, her body a perfect line under the spotlight, caught sight of her parents' ecstatic, shouting faces and she and the other Hershey Kiss' kids piled confidently off the ice. This is the first memory I have of performing in a public arena, and while I never felt really cut out for it, I admire those who have the ambition. Maybe it's the relation I felt with all of the contestants up there that day. The relation we all can feel when we are out in the world trying to connect to each other and express ourselves, as we pursue our own ideas of life or liberty.

But then again, maybe it's something else that draws me in to the pseudo-reality. *America's Got Talent* is just one of dozens upon dozens of reality shows that deluge the media landscape. In the act of watching other people's pursuits of life and liberty, have I and the rest of my reality watchers let ourselves slip into a passive state of video voyeurism, and if we have, is it really all that bad?

Currently, if I choose to, I can watch just about anyone do anything. Besides the second rate celebrities I can view getting hired, fired, dancing, dating, or just cohabitating, I can switch on my set and see Average or even Not-So-Average Joe and Mary Schmoe redecorate their rec-room, have surgery, give birth, count their sextuplets, or bicker about bills. When Socrates said "the unexamined life is not worth living, I'm pretty sure he didn't mean

the examining of other people's lives.

And how about the subjects of these supposed reality series? How will the participants of these shows feel about exposing their lives for entertainment purposes once the cameras have packed up? Will their children who more often than not have never had a reality outside of a camera crew in their home be traumatized? Still, I hold the belief that the reflective lens of a T.V. camera in our homes and in our lives won't replace the human desire for self reflection. I'm just not sure how that concept will make it onto primetime.